



Course report 2023

National 5 English

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics in the report were compiled before any appeals were completed.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022: 47,720

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 48,999

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	19,514	Percentage	39.8	Cumulative percentage	39.8	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	13,194	Percentage	26.9	Cumulative percentage	66.8	Minimum mark required	59
C	Number of candidates	9,562	Percentage	19.5	Cumulative percentage	86.3	Minimum mark required	48
D	Number of candidates	4,501	Percentage	9.2	Cumulative percentage	95.5	Minimum mark required	37
No award	Number of candidates	2,228	Percentage	4.5	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

Please note that rounding has not been applied to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ◆ 'most' means greater than 70%
- ◆ 'many' means 50% to 69%
- ◆ 'some' means 25% to 49%
- ◆ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find more statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of SQA's website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Across all components, the course assessment operated as expected, and candidates performed well.

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper performed as intended and assessed candidates effectively in the skills of reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation at SCQF level 5.

The unseen passage selected, 'The Bounding Success of *Bluey*,' was slightly adapted from a piece in The Guardian on the TV animation *Bluey* by Stuart Heritage. The passage was well received by candidates. Feedback from teachers and lecturers suggested that it was appropriate in terms of content and level of demand. Most candidates demonstrated a good understanding of the passage and were able to analyse and evaluate the writer's use of language at a level appropriate to National 5.

Most questions sampled candidates' key skills in either understanding the writer's main ideas or analysing the writer's use of language. There were also questions on the writer's use of structural techniques.

Question paper: Critical Reading

This question paper performed as intended and gave candidates the platform to respond effectively to the texts they had studied throughout the course.

In 2022, there was some evidence that centres had chosen shorter texts than would normally have been the case. This year there was still a sense that this remained the case, but there was evidence of longer texts, which offered clear depth and substance. Such texts have an impact and a wider value for candidates beyond the requirements of question paper assessment. Texts from the Scottish set text list were again reasonably common choices for the critical essay.

There is complete free choice for critical essay texts, and it was encouraging to see some centres responding to this with texts that reflected candidates' needs in terms of diversity and contemporary relevance.

For Scottish texts, Norman MacCaig was again the most popular option, followed by *Tally's Blood* by Ann Marie di Mambro, and then *Sailmaker* by Alan Spence. Carol Ann Duffy, Edwin Morgan, and Jackie Kay were also common selections. For prose, Anne Donovan was the most popular option, followed by Robert Louis Stevenson. For the critical essay, prose was chosen by the largest number of candidates. The following are examples of some of the texts studied for critical essay:

Drama

An Inspector Calls by J.B. Priestley, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare, *A View from the Bridge*, *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams.

Prose

The Pedestrian by Ray Bradbury, *On The Sidewalk Bleeding* by Evan Hunter, *The Test* by Angelica Gibbs, *The Lighthouse* by Agnes Owens, *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *A Hanging*, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Superman and Paula Brown's new Snowsuit* by Sylvia Plath, *The Sniper* by Liam O'Flaherty, *Loose Change* by Andrea Levy, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *The Tell Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Flowers* by Robin Jenkins, *At The Bar* by William McIlvanney, *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson, *When the Wasps Drowned* by Clare Wigfall, *Father and Son* by Bernard MacLaverty.

Poetry

War poetry (often *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen), *Havisham*, *In Mrs Tilscher's Class*, *War Photographer* by Carol Ann Duffy, *Mid Term Break*, *Digging* by Seamus Heaney, *Glasgow 5 March 1971* by Edwin Morgan, *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka, *The Jaguar* by Ted Hughes, *The Hill We Climb* by Amanda Gorman, *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou.

Film

Psycho, *1917*, *Dunkirk*, *Shutter Island*, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Get Out*, *The Dark Knight*, *Children of Men*, *Shawshank Redemption*, season 1 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

For the Language section of the critical essay there were very few responses, but these included responses to texts written by Martin Luther King Jr.

Portfolio-writing

Under course assessment modifications, candidates were required to submit one portfolio piece for external assessment. This was chosen from either broadly discursive or broadly creative writing completed throughout the year under some centre supervision and control.

Performance was strong and the overall quality of the writing was good. There were fewer low scoring pieces than has been evident in the past. It is likely that the focus on one piece had been effective in helping candidates to develop and improve their writing skills, perhaps across a range of types and genres during the course. It was clear that candidates had enjoyed producing the work; this engagement was reflected in the marks received.

Most candidates submitted a reasonably well-developed response in language that was sufficiently clear and technically accurate. In the main, pieces were thoughtful and well planned.

The split was fairly equal between those who chose to write in a broadly discursive way, and those who chose to write broadly creatively, with slightly more opting for discursive. Under the broadly creative heading, most candidates reflected on and wrote about their own experiences (often significant life events such as moving house, birth of siblings, changes in family circumstances, mental health and/or anxiety). Some candidates chose to submit a piece of creative writing, mostly prose fiction. The theme or subject matter here was often war or horror. Poetry provided a good vehicle for some candidates' creativity; most pieces were considered and well crafted.

Examples of some broadly discursive topics explored for the portfolio–writing:

- ◆ VAR (video assistant referee)
- ◆ social media dangers
- ◆ fossil fuels and sustainable energy
- ◆ wind farms
- ◆ gun laws in USA
- ◆ the future of the monarchy
- ◆ LIV golf
- ◆ representation of women in the media
- ◆ benefits of video games
- ◆ Scottish independence
- ◆ wild animals or animals in captivity
- ◆ Qatar World Cup
- ◆ fast fashion
- ◆ plastics in oceans
- ◆ true crime investigations
- ◆ capital punishment

Performance–spoken language

The requirement to assess spoken language was removed for session 2022–23.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

There were strong responses to questions requiring analysis of the writer's use of language (for example questions 2 and 6). There was some improvement in the quality of candidates' responses to the structural link question (question 3).

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question 4: this question assessed candidates' understanding of 10 lines of the passage, requiring them to 'summarise how the ideas for the show developed.' Five clear points were required for full marks, but many candidates were only able successfully to put forward two. The use of own words was a significant obstacle for many candidates.

Question 5: here the key defining word of the question (*Bluey's* 'appeal') was not always addressed and some responses were vague and imprecise. The use of 'own words' was again an issue for some candidates.

Question 7: this question on the 'effects that *Bluey* can have on its viewers' was challenging for many candidates. A degree of inference was required, and some candidates were able only to quote back the wording of the passage instead of demonstrating their own understanding.

Question 8: this question asked candidates to 'identify the challenges Brumm faces when making a new series of *Bluey*.' Five key points of understanding were required, but many candidates were not able to draw distinctions between the writer's ideas. Candidates often repeated one or two very similar points several times.

Question 9: most candidates were able to make an appropriate selection, but many were not able to explain how it contributed to the passage's effective conclusion.

Question paper: Critical Reading

There was again strong performance overall in the Scottish text section where candidates had clearly worked hard on, and engaged with, the texts they had been studying. However, a few candidates did significantly better in the questions on the published extract than in the final question on the remainder of the text or the wider group of texts. A few did not complete or attempt the final question. In both the Scottish text section and in the critical essay, some candidates relied too heavily on repeating content rather than demonstrating analysis.

In the critical essay section, there were some exceptional responses that showed a very good understanding and a thorough awareness of the texts studied. However, performance in the critical essay was again slightly weaker overall. Some candidates did noticeably better in the Scottish text section than in the critical essay. A few candidates produced essays that resembled a set of bullet points or notes, rather than coherent, structured pieces of critical writing. Some critical essays stayed very relevant to the task, others less so. A small minority of candidates had difficulty navigating the options available in the question paper.

Portfolio-writing

Candidates were well prepared for the portfolio, and performance was slightly stronger than last year. As is generally the case with the National 5 portfolio, there was a personal authenticity to the writing, and in most cases, candidates had taken care to demonstrate the skills they had learned as fully as possible. A few essays were exceptional and were of a standard from the very top end of National 5 performance and beyond. Discursive pieces were well structured with a clear line of thought: topic sentences and linking words and phrases were used successfully.

Overall, personal pieces that came across as authentic and well-crafted did well. Often the exploration of a hobby or interest proved successful. Less successful pieces were thin in reflection and lacked creativity in the use of language.

There was evidence of a good amount of independent research in discursive writing. However, in some cases discursive writing relied too heavily on ideas contained in the quoted references: there was insufficient commentary from the candidate.

In creative writing, some candidates were able to make effective use of a created narrative voice and atmosphere. Some candidates had a good awareness of which features should be expected for a given genre. However, a few candidates had difficulty in devising a coherent narrative or plot.

Some candidates were able to engage creatively with the genres of poetry or drama and produced some very good work. However, within this group, a small number submitted work that relied heavily on models, and this often came across as forced or derivative.

Overall, most pieces contained expression which was sufficiently clear and accurate, but a few candidates had difficulties in dealing with verb tenses.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper is an assessment of candidates' general reading skills. The best way for candidates to prepare for it is to read widely, thinking about the content, ideas and language of what is being read. This question paper requires precise reading of detailed texts.

In preparation for this assessment, teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to:

- ◆ read the passage carefully, thinking about and isolating the writer's key ideas
- ◆ read each question carefully, making sure that key words and all aspects of the question are addressed
- ◆ practise expressing responses coherently, using own words as far as possible (where required)
- ◆ be careful not to base responses on the words of the question or key words from the passage

The practice of using a 'translation' approach to understanding questions is limiting and potentially misleading. As part of their approach, some candidates quoted sections of the passage and then tried to render into their own words, word-for-word by synonym. Often, this did not allow candidates to demonstrate full understanding of the writer's ideas.

Candidates should pay careful attention to the requirement to use their own words to demonstrate their understanding of key ideas in the passage. The expression 'own words' is emboldened where appropriate in order to remind candidates of its importance. Direct lifts of words or expressions from the question and/or passage will gain no marks in this type of question.

In questions that require the analysis of a writer's use of language, a helpful model to follow is reference plus relevant comment. At National 5, appropriate references are awarded 1 mark. A further 1 mark is given for a relevant analytical comment. Candidates should make their language selection (either quotation or reference) clear and should try to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can, making sure that their response stays closely relevant to the question.

In order to aid the separation of ideas into clear, distinct points, it can be helpful to organise responses to high mark understanding questions in bullet point form.

For a structural link question, candidates must make a selection from the sentence quoted in the question: retrieving and basing a response on the whole sentence will gain no marks. Candidates must approach it as a question on structure, not a 'word choice' question.

Question paper: Critical Reading

When choosing texts for critical essay, it is important to champion good quality literature while ensuring that candidates feel included in and represented by the texts they study. Equally, texts should expand candidates' imaginative, intellectual and emotional horizons.

Candidates should revise overarching ideas, themes or issues when preparing a play, novel, collection of short stories or poems for the final question in the Scottish text section. Key aspects of analysis should be addressed.

Candidates should be careful not to repeat key words of the question and use them as a basis for analytical comment. This is especially true in the final question of the Scottish text section. The skill of analysis is required for this question and candidates should not rely on just a narrative summary of the texts studied.

When constructing critical essays, candidates should remember that these are pieces of critical writing, which should have coherence and a line of thought relevant to the question selected. Candidates should be aiming to express a point of view in response to the question: the essay should not merely be a list of separate points, or a collection of notes.

Candidates who are handwriting their responses in the examination should practise this skill so as to ensure that they can write clearly and legibly under timed conditions. Candidates for whom handwriting is an issue should consider the use of IT.

All candidates should be made aware of the requirements of the question paper and be reminded of how to navigate the range of options successfully.

Portfolio-writing

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to explore different genres and types of writing. The piece submitted for assessment should suit candidates' personal strengths: personalisation and choice should be offered here. A whole cohort approach to type and/or genre of writing is unlikely to meet candidates' needs.

In creative writing, candidates should be aware of, and try to use, the key features of the genre chosen. In personal writing, candidates should attempt to express an exploration of, or reflection on, their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to an experience, rather than offering a narrative summary of events. Candidates should aim to create a personal, authentic voice in their writing.

In discursive writing, candidates should ensure that their writing contains their own ideas and commentary. There should not be an over-reliance on the ideas contained in quoted or referenced sources. Candidates must acknowledge all sources they use in preparation for writing. Taking time on the organisation and acknowledgement of sources improves presentation, helps markers, and develops good study habits.

Candidates should aim for clarity of expression and structure in their writing. They should take care with verb tense, making sure that any changes in tense correspond with intended effects.

Centres are reminded of the requirements for supporting candidates during the writing process. It is acceptable for a teacher or lecturer to provide an initial discussion with the candidate on the selection of a topic, theme, genre, leading to an outline plan and written or oral feedback on one draft of writing. It is not acceptable for a teacher or lecturer to provide, for example, model answers that are specific to candidate tasks, key ideas, or a specific structure or plan. Candidates should be given and make use of the opportunity to reflect on and to redraft their piece of writing following feedback on a first draft. The final writing of the piece must be conducted under some supervision and control. This means that, although candidates may complete part of the work outwith the learning and teaching situation, teachers or lecturers must put in place processes for monitoring progress to ensure that the work is the candidate's own, and that plagiarism has not taken place.

Candidates should be encouraged to take care with the technical accuracy of their writing, especially when preparing their final drafts.

For poetry, a single poem is treated in exactly the same way as any other piece of writing: one piece is required. It is acceptable to submit a group of related short poems, but these will be treated as one piece and will be marked as such. Introductory and/or explanatory comments should not be included.

Candidates should be reminded of the required word limits (1,000 words). There is no minimum number of words.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year on year. This is because the specific questions, and the mix of questions, are different and this has an impact on candidate performance.

This year, a package of support measures was developed to support learners and centres. This included modifications to course assessment, retained from the 2021–22 session. This support was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic while recognising a lessening of the impact of disruption to learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic. The revision support that was available for the 2021–22 session was not offered to learners in 2022–23.

In addition, SQA adopted a sensitive approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining

standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams continue to do so in different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019 and 2022.

The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2023 and the ongoing impact the disruption from the pandemic has had on learners. On a course-by-course basis, SQA has determined grade boundaries in a way that is fair to candidates, taking into account how the assessment (exams and coursework) has functioned and the impact of assessment modifications and the removal of revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2023 relate to the specific experience of this year's cohort and should not be used by centres if these assessments are used in the future for exam preparation.

For full details of the approach please refer to the [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).